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AUTHOR Fox, Jill Englebright
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ABSTRACT

A child's need for formal communication may be as much an emotional need as a cognitive need. Several theories attempt to explain children's language development, including the theories developed by B. F. Skinner, Noam Chomsky, and J. Bruner. Most children typically follow a standard sequence of language development: crying and cooing, babbling, first words, and first sentences. Parents influence a child's language development in different ways. Fathers generally interact with their children more often as playmates than as caregivers, while mothers tend to use more baby talk and have quieter interactions. Nonparental caregivers may have a significant effect on a child's language development. Caregivers should be aware that they may have the responsibility of filling the gaps if the child's parents are not interactive or if positive interactions have been limited. Both parents and early childhood teachers should help children use language to meet their emotional needs for communication and interaction. A bibliography of 20 books for infants and toddlers is appended. (MM)

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Infant and Toddler Language Development

Jill Englebright Fox, M.Ed.

University of North Texas

Running Head: LANGUAGE

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INFANT AND TODDLER LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

My oldest son was an early talker. He produced his first words at around nine or ten months of age, moved quickly to telegraphic speech, and was speaking in reasonably complex sentences by two years of age. My second son, whose calm and sunny disposition is so different from his brother's joyful, whirlwind presence, has decided to follow his own developmental timeline. He waited until he was fourteen months old to walk. Now, at age two years and ten months, potty-training is still a bit of a challenge and he has just become comfortable with using sentences that are more than one word long to communicate with the world around him. As a mother I have been concerned about my baby's slower than typical developmental rate. My husband and I have watched our son carefully and have been extremely vigilant about medical check-ups in the thought that if something were actually wrong we could catch it (and fix it) early on. As an early childhood educator I have been fascinated with the differences between my two boys. I have been fortunate enough to have the resources available to research and reassure myself and my husband about the "normalcy" of our son's development and to discover what we, as a family, could do to foster his efforts. I would like to share with

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you some of what I have learned.

Purpose of Language

Even before he begins to use words and sentences to speak, the young child is very efficient at communicating with those around him. A smile tells mommy that baby is glad to see her, a tug on daddy's pant leg lets him know that baby wants his attention, a hungry cry lets the caregiver know that it's time for lunch--NOW! Why then does a child need to learn to speak at all? If he is capable of nonverbal communication with the people in his environment, why do the child need to speak a formal language? Greenberg (1991) outlines seven reasons children learn to communicate verbally:

1. to develop a feeling of belonging to and being involved with the people and the events around them. (to make a warm and mutually trusting connection with the people around them)

2. to develop a sense of the effect they can have on their environment (to cause adults to respond to their needs).

3. to develop confidence in their own cognitive abilities to make sense of their surroundings.

4. to coordinate and control the emotional, unsocialized parts (the ids) of their personalities.

5. to gain autonomy and independence.

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6. to be able to communicate with, respond to, interact with, and meet the needs of the cultural customs of those around them.

7. to interact with other children.

In analyzing Greenberg's reasons it becomes clear that the child's need for formal communication may be as much an emotional need as it is a cognitive need. Language is deeply rooted in family and cultural identity. Even at a very early age the child needs to identify with his family and have a sense of belonging within a family and cultural group. Language helps to fill that need.

Formal language typically begins regularly when the child is around 18 months of age. Environmental factors, such as socio-economic status, siblings, whether or not the parents are verbally or auditorily impaired, or the particular language the child is acquiring, appear to have no real bearing on the age at which the child learns to speak. The beginning of formal language also seems to occur relatively independent of any particular need to speak.
How then does the child learn to speak?

Theories of Language Development

In his book Verbal Behavior, published in 1957, B. F. Skinner proposed that language is a learned behavior. As the infant and the young child produce

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vocalizations, adults apply reinforcements until these utterances become more and more like adult speech. Although Skinner's theory has many practical applications for speech and language therapists as they work to help children overcome language delays and disabilities, it is a bit far-fetched when applied to typical language development. If this were truly the case, parents would be required to engage in deliberate and intensive language tutoring for the first five years of life, at the end of which time most children have a usable vocabulary of over 14,000 words (McClinton & Meier, 1978).

Chomsky, as well as other researchers, believes that the infant is born with a capacity for learning language. A Language Acquisition Device (LAD) in the brain provides a set of innate skills that enables the child to infer phoneme patterns, word meanings and syntax from the language she hears. The LAD thus facilitates the child's own attempts to communicate verbally. Chomsky and his colleagues believe that heredity plays a major role in language development (Black, Puckett & Bell, 1991).

Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, believed that language influences thought. Vygotsky proposed that the speech of the infant and the young child is actually the child communicating with herself, or

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thinking out loud. He noted that young children tend to talk to themselves most often when they are confused or when they are attempting to work out a problem. Vygotsky hypothesized that this speech was actually the child's attempt to problem-solve or guide her own behavior (Black, Puckett, & Bell, 1991).

Bruner (1983) believes that play and language are very closely related. He states that the first language is most rapidly acquired when it is "learned" in playful activity. The child's play, by its very nature, encourages combinations of activity and language. The child considers play important enough that he is concerned about problems that might occur as a result of his language errors, and so has incentive to concentrate on "correct" language production. Bruner points to studies by Katherine Nelson and Ruth Weir which conclude that young children often extend their language capabilities at night, right after they have been put to bed and the lights have been turned out. Recordings of these bedtime monologues reveal children playing with language and playing with their own thought processes.

Stages of Language Acquisition

Although individual children vary considerably in their rates of language acquisition, most typically follow a standard sequence of language development.

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STAGE 1 Crying and Cooing

The earliest vocal behavior of the infant is crying. Although crying patterns in children change with age, they do persist as a form of vocalization throughout development. Through crying the infant can communicate needs and desires to parents and caregivers. Because of changes in the vocal apparatus that occur during crying, many researchers do not truly believe that crying is a part of formal language development.

A second form of early vocalization develops during the sixth to eights week of life--cooing. This may be the true beginning of formal language. Cooing frequently follows smiling and can be easily elicited from infants after the second month of life. Cooing consists mostly of vocalized vowel sounds, but becomes more varied as the child gets older.

STAGE 2 Babbling

The babbling stage generally begins when the infant is about six months old and lasts until approximately the end of the first year. During this time the child frequently vocalizes short strings of varied sounds accompanied by distinct intonation patterns. Babbling differs from cooing because the sounds are no longer continuous, but are broken up into syllables by the insertion of various consonant sounds.

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The child quickly becomes capable of producing a large range of sounds.

STAGE 3 First Words

At sometime around one year of age the child begins to produce isolated words. As this happens, the frequency of vocalization drops and the range of sounds produced is limited as the child concentrates on producing specific sound patterns or words. This stage is sometimes called the holophrastic stage because the child may use one word to convey a sentence or even a paragraph full of meaning. The use of one particular word with varying intonation patterns, different accompanying actions or gestures, and in varying contexts, indicates that the child is doing more than just naming or labeling objects.

STAGE 4 First Sentences

Somewhere during the second half of the first year the child will begin to combine isolated words to form telegraphic speech. These first sentences, usually two or three words long, basically resemble telegraphs. Children use basic information-bearing words and leave out less informative words like articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. Subjects, verbs, and objects are included in telegraphic speech, with verbs being used least frequently, and objects being used most frequently (McClinton & Meier, 1978).

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Some children, for whatever reason, experience delays in language development. These differences may be accounted for in several ways. The development of hemispheric dominance in the brain or the interaction (or the lack of interaction) of the child with significant others may be causes of atypical developmental rates. A more subtle cause may be the attitude with which significant others attempt to facilitate the child's language development. Is language acquisition approached as a cognitive task in formal settings? Or is the child given the opportunity to use language appropriately in a variety of suitably stimulating contexts? Early childhood teachers can evaluate children's language development in two ways: (1) formally, by eliciting language responses from children through specific learning tasks; or (2) informally, by observing the child during daily activities (Charlesworth, 1987).

Greenberg (1991) states that typically by the time a child reaches his or her first birthday he can use verbal or nonverbal language to let caregivers know what he needs them to do and protests if the caregivers don't comply. Charlesworth (1987) says that a twenty-month-old, asked to name specific body parts, could typically be expected to name about eight correctly. A fifteen to twenty-month-old could be expected to use

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two-word combinations. Three-year-olds could be expected to use language appropriately during simple games and activities.

Adult Influences

Most adults modify their speech when they talk to a young child. Their utterances are shorter and grammatically very simple--not much more complex than what the child herself would produce. Adults repeat or paraphrase themselves when talking to a young child. They speak slower and their pitch and intonation are high and varied enough to capture and maintain the child's attention (Genishi, 1984). Although this type of language has been given many names (caregiver speech, mother- or fatherese, etc.), it is most commonly called "baby talk". Some professionals have in the past disdained the use of baby talk, but it is now recognized that these simplified speech patterns help the child to build her own schemata and thus aid in the language acquisition process. Adults must remember, however, to grow with the child and keep their baby talk slightly ahead of the child's own language capabilities until baby talk is no longer needed, somewhere between the second and third years of age.

Although both parents have considerable influence on the child's language development, each interacts in

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a unique way. Fathers typically treat their sons, especially their first born sons, differently than their daughters. They vocalize more to sons and are more physically active with them. Fathers generally interact with their children more often as playmates than as caregivers. The language directed at their children reflects this playfulness, and often includes nicknames that may be affectionately insulting. Fathers also tend to use more imperatives and direct commands than mothers (Genishi, 1984). Finally, fathers are more apt to introduce children to more technical terms and words that are longer and more difficult to pronounce. As a result, fathers tend to elicit language from their children that is much more sophisticated than what mothers typically hear. Fathers, however, have been found to be less perceptive than mothers in their listening skills. This lack of attentiveness may actually be helpful to the language development of their children. In order to capture and hold his father's attention,the child must be extra creative and extra verbal during conversations. Interestingly, male day care teachers appear to interact linguistically with children in much the same ways that female day care teachers do, rather than assuming the typical father role (Genishi, 1984).

Bruner (1983) asserts that mothers typically use

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baby talk with their children. This type of interaction may be especially helpful to the language acquisition process if it includes the mother's use of questioning, her acceptance of the child's answers and comments, her response to the child as if his or her speech was meaningful, and her use of fewer commands and less directive speech (Black, Puckett, & Bell, 1991). Most often, the mother is the primary source of speech directed to the child, but typically her speech occurs in a routine context so that there is less of an opportunity to introduce or experiment with new words. Mothers typically have quieter interactions with the child than fathers do, using much repetition in their speech and words that are already familiar to the child.

Non-Parental Caregivers

Although language development is usually considered to be a product of the child's home and family interactions, non-parental caregivers may affect the child much as parents do and may have significant influence on the language acquisition process.

(1) Caregivers should be aware that they may have the responsibility of filling the gaps if the child's parents are non-interactive or if positive interactions have been limited for whatever reason.

(2) Caregivers must talk to children! For the

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infant, they can label objects and actions that are relevant to the child and echo the child's coos and babbles. The caregivers can help the infant to know that his first language attempts have merit and will elicit a caring response. For the toddler, caregivers can similarly use language to monologue the child's activities, or to dialogue with her about her play activities. Opportunities for language development can be introduced through concrete experiences that directly involve the child (Greenberg, 1991).

(3) Caregivers can teach the child songs, fingerplays and nursery rhymes to help him learn to play and experiment with language just for the fun of it (Genishi, 1988).

(4) Caregivers can read to the infant and the young child. The close proximity and the enjoyment of sharing a story are reasons enough for sharing literature with young children. The intonation patterns used during reading are fascinating to the infant and will likely be incorporated in language development by Chomsky's LAD. For the toddler, books and stories are one of the best ways to introduce new vocabulary in a meaningful context (Genishi, 1988).

(5) Caregivers can create a classroom environment that fosters and values language. Caregivers can model language usage by talking to the children and to each

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other, and by encouraging children to talk to each other. Listening skills may also be modeled as the caregivers attend carefully to the child and respond to her vocalizations (Greenberg, 1991).

(6) Caregivers can take advantage of special events or happenings in the classroom or in the child's life at home. The child should be encouraged to talk about them to the caregivers and to each other.

Conclusion

Language development is a very complex process. The young child typically hears over 100,000 words each day (Genishi, 1988). It is a credit to each child's cognitive ability that he is able to sort through and make sense of the vast amount of language that he is exposed to. As a parent and as an early childhood teacher it is my role to help my son make sense of those many sounds and learn to use them to meet his emotional needs for communication and interaction.

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